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Plan to expand granite mining angers LDS quarry's neighbors

Church wants to excavate nearer to area residences

Associated Press

A proposed expansion of the LDS Church's granite mining operation in Little Cottonwood Canyon has some neighbors upset.

Church officials say they want to start quarrying closer to local houses in order to finish the job faster. But residents say the church is just being greedy.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has nearly doubled its projections for the amount of rock needed to complete its Assembly Building under construction in downtown Salt Lake City.

On Tuesday, the church plans to ask the Salt Lake County Planning Commission to allow it to quarry within 1,000 feet of residential areas — which is now against the rules.

"We're just trying to finish the job," said church architect Kerry Nielsen. The 21,000-seat hall is tentatively set to open in April, and Nielsen said that collecting boulders for the granite facing on the flats nearer homes would be quicker than dredging them out from a pile at the foot of the hill.

But some neighbors of the quarry — which supplied granite for the original Salt Lake Temple a century ago — suspect the church wants to stockpile extra rock so future Temple Square buildings will match.

"I just know in my heart that once this 1,000-foot barrier is broken they'll just keep going," said Karen Cunningham, a quarry neighbor who unsuccessfully sued to stop the mining.

The county originally gave the church a permit under the assumption it would collect 11,400 tons of rock from boulders on church property. But in February, Nielsen wrote county Planning Director J.D. Johnson, saying the project would require up to

10,000 tons more than that estimate.

Idaho Travertine Corp., which is collecting the rock, has already quarried 13,000 tons but discovered that many of the slabs are fractured internally and can't be used. Owner Theo Orchard said more than half of the material is wasted because it emerges with cracks or is damaged en route to the plant in Idaho Falls.

But Orchard insisted the leftovers are not being held for future construction. Rather, they will probably be crushed into landscaping pebbles.

"Our instructions are to just get material for this building," he said.

The church is asking neighbors to let Idaho Travertine dig within 750 feet of some under-construction homes, with the understanding the company will back off when the homes are built.

But Johnson is not optimistic that will happen.

"I felt like we had made some agreements on the 1,000-foot (limit)," the planning director said.

Opponents who fought the initial quarry application are also preparing to appear at Tuesday's Planning Commission meeting.

Cunningham, for example, said the blasts that split the boulders are close enough to her home now, and often rattle her windows.

And rock climber Dave Carrier says the quarry could scar one of the Wasatch Front's most pristine areas if allowed to grow.

"It's long past the time when quarrying and mining were appropriate uses for these canyons," Carrier said.

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